

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 6:24–35. In this text we read about the crowd’s challenge for Jesus to produce a sign superior to that of Moses who gave Manna in the desert. We also hear of our Lord’s identification of Himself as the “true bread” that came down from heaven. The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd reveals that they do not understand who He is. Their misunderstanding is revealed by the fact that they greet Him with the title “Rabbi”. In this passage, Jesus reveals to them and us His identity. This revelation is meant to inform our discipleship so that we can seek the food that never perishes.

The first instruction that Jesus gives to the crowds who follow Him is that they should work for the food that endures for eternal life as opposed to the food that perishes. Jesus can provide this food because He bears the “seal” of the Father. Seals in the ancient world were a sign of authority, verification of authenticity, and endorsement of mission. Jesus bears the seal of the Father and so Jesus can be the agent of God who reveals the Father to the world. In order for the crowds to understand and accept Jesus as the one upon whom the Father has set His seal, they will have to know the Lord as more than just a Rabbi; they must acknowledge Jesus as the Eternal Word that has come down from heaven. The crowds that followed Jesus were seeking momentary satisfaction for their hunger. Jesus wanted to offer them something that would satisfy their hunger for eternity; namely, a life-giving relationship with God.

Rather than seeking fleeting pleasures and momentary curiosities, Jesus wants to offer us the same life-giving eternal relationship that He wished to give the crowds. Our world is full of wonderful, created goods that offer enjoyment, entertainment, and comfort. In the midst of these goods, we need to remember that no created thing, not even human relationships or professional pursuits, can satisfy us for eternity. We were created to know, love, and serve the Lord in this life and to be with God in eternal life. While we enjoy the goods of creation, as disciples we must be able to always look beyond them to discover the goodness of the Creator and be drawn into relationship with God in Jesus through our adoration, praise, and thanksgiving. It is important that we understand the necessity of relating to God in the person of Jesus. Jesus points to this necessity when He responds to the crowds who were seeking to do the works of God. Our Lord instructs them that the greatest work of God they can do is to believe in the one whom God has sent. Jesus reveals the fullness of God’s will in His very person (see Jn 14:9). Thus, the only food that endures for eternal life and is worthy of all our time and energy in this life is the relationship revealed to us by the Father in the Son.

What are some of the temporary hungers or curiosities than can draw people to seek the Lord for momentary satisfaction today?

How can a faith community better help people realize that their momentary hungers and curiosities are really an invitation to a profound and lasting relationship with Jesus Christ?

What has helped you look beyond the temporal goods of creation so as to enter into relationship with the Creator?

How can moments of dissatisfaction and frustration become opportunities for deeper faith?

When has the Lord drawn you to Himself and awakened within you the gift of faith by feeding a momentary hunger in your life?

In response to our Lord's instruction and invitation to believe in Him, the crowds demand a sign to validate His claim. If Jesus is the one upon whom the Father has placed His seal, He is greater than Moses, and the crowds expect Him to demonstrate a sign greater than anything Moses did. The specification of the sign of Manna has particular significance. We must remember that the gift of Manna had a purpose, which was to keep the Hebrews moving forward in the desert so they would not want to return to Egypt (a place of slavery). Manna, then, was food for the journey that sustained the people as they progressed towards the Promised Land. Jesus fed the five thousand people in John 6:1–15 but the crowds did not understand that sign, and so they failed to grasp the significance of the food that was provided to them as their fathers also did in the desert (see Nm 21:5). In this week's Gospel passage, Jesus is now leading the crowds to a deeper understanding of the bread that He gave in last week's reading. Like the crowds, sometimes Jesus has to first feed us so He can lead us. The problem is that we can forget the purpose of the Lord's food and can become complacent in our faith life. This complacency happens when we choose to stop growing in our discipleship because we think we have gone far enough or because we don't want to embrace the faithful sacrifices that are required in order to continue growing closer to the Lord. The crowds were seeking Jesus so that they could have the next piece of bread and not because they wanted to commit their lives to Him. The same thing can happen to us when we come to church because we want to feel better about the way we are rather than to become the persons God wants us to be. The food that Jesus gives in the Eucharist and in our relationship with Him is meant to transform us and motivate us to move forward in our discipleship until we reach the promised land of heaven.

What tempts you to become complacent in your journey of discipleship?

What happens when a person tries to progress in their life of faith without seeking food for the journey?

How does the Word of God in Scripture provide food for the journey?

How does the Eucharist provide food for the journey?

What happens when we want to be fed but are not willing to be led?

What is the next step God wants you to take in your journey of discipleship to the promised land of heaven?

The Gospel passage for this Sunday ends with Jesus identifying Himself as the "Bread of Life". Several interpretative keys needed to correctly unlock the meaning of this self-revelation are contained in the passage itself. For example, when Jesus says that the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, we need to remember that in the beginning of John's Gospel we were told that the Word was with God, was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (see Jn 1:1,14). Also, the comparison between Moses, as the one through whom the Law was given, and Jesus, as the one through whom grace and truth are received, was previously introduced in the prologue of John's Gospel (see Jn 1:17). This section of chapter 6 of John's Gospel builds upon these insights previously given. The reference to Manna (previously discussed) was also understood as an image for the Law of Moses from which the people would "feed" their hunger for God's Word. Only in Jesus can the hunger for God's Word be fully and completely satisfied, and for this reason our Lord says, "whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever

believes in me will never thirst” (Jn 6:35). The image of people being fed with God’s Word (self-revelation) was deeply rooted in the writings of the Old Testament. This image is especially true in the Wisdom literature. For example, Sirach 24:21 states about wisdom, “Those who eat of me will hunger still, those who drink of me will thirst for more.” The verse of Proverbs 9:5 expresses the famous invitation of personified Lady Wisdom when it says, “Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!” These references are not about being fed with physical food but about being fed on the Word of God. The text of Isaiah 55:10–11 contains the most important verses for properly interpreting Jesus’ reference in this passage of John’s Gospel when the prophet states:

Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and **bread to the one who eats**, so shall **my word** be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it.

It is in light of this background that most Scripture scholars interpret Jesus’ statement in this passage to mean that He is the self-revelation of God (Word) who alone can feed our deepest hungers and bring us into eternal life. The Law was revealed through Moses and was symbolized by Manna, but those who were fed by that gift continued to hunger. Those who feed on the revelation of God in Jesus, the Eternal Word, will receive life and never hunger. The Eternal Word of God continues to be present for us when the Word is proclaimed, especially when the Scriptures are read at every Mass. Jesus offers to feed our souls by revealing to us the Father in His very person and by teaching us through life, ministry, Death, and Resurrection the life we are called to live as faithful disciples. For this reason, the proclamation of the Gospel receives special attention and reverence since those texts show us most clearly the person of Jesus as the revelation of the Father. After all, we cannot enter into the Christian mystery until we know the Christian story, and for this reason Saint Jerome taught that “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ”.

*When has the Word of God in Scripture been food for your soul?
How does the phrase, “We cannot enter into the Christian mystery until we know the Christian story,” challenge you to read Scripture?
How have the Scriptures fed your relationship with Jesus?
What can a faith community do to help people hear Jesus speaking to them in the Scriptures?*